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THE CHINESE OF CHINA.

SHORT ESSAYS UPON THE BEAUTIFUL IN ART.

(From the French of R. TOPPFER.)

THEY are a droll set of people, the Chinese. I speak of the Chinese of China—not the Chinese of Voltaire, that nation of true sages, philosophers, and savants, of whom the great man made a sort of rod with which to rap the knuckles of the West. All schoolmasters have an ideal good boy, whom they hold up for an example to the naughty ones.

But whilst we are in China, would you like to see what becomes of painting reduced to a process? There is no necessity to go further—the Chinese paint in perfection. They make things perfectly astonishing for finish; things dotted, smoothed, niggled to a degree which would delight the father of a family; but flat, stupid, uniform, and without the shadow of a thought. The reason is, that *Art* does not exist among the Chinese. But when we consider the fact that, for thousands of years, the Chinese have possessed absolute perfection in the process of *Art*, without a single one among them having ever risen higher than a sign-painter—truly, we may say again, the Chinese are a droll people, and altogether inexplicable! It must be said that this arises from the fact that they are a people eminently conservative and stationary in everything, in civilization, in politics; and, consequently, in the fine arts also. Yes, that is true; but it is precisely this fact which astonishes me; it is this which I would like to have explained.

It may be supposed that it is the effect of climate—as well say that it is the tea they drink, or of their political system—as if the arts have not flourished under all systems; that it is the consequence of the law of caste. Well, we will change our ground, and ask *why* they have had castes for thousands of years? No, the Chinese are a very strange people: but are they people? I pray the reader, not to laugh at me, before hearing me. I take the ground, that if we are people, they are not, and *vice versa*.

In all things, we, the nations of the West, advance or recede; one of our centuries is never like another—ideas, arts, politics, religion, industry, all moves, advances, retreats, expands, is obscured, lost, restored, all changes constantly. It is a fact belonging to our nature—a fact the universal absence of which, among the Chinese, gives me reason to doubt that they are beings like ourselves.

Among our western nations there are universally as many differences as resemblances, and without going beyond our own country, we find twenty-two communities, so different and so opposed, that we can hardly look at any one thing from the same point of view, judge the same facts by the same rule, or understand each other on the same point. Yet, among the Chinese, two hundred millions of men see through the same spectacles, judge by the same rule, are as unanimous about everything as they are about drinking

tea—certainly we, at least, are not beings like them! But the most striking fact still remains. From individual to individual among us, what diversity of intellect, of opinions, of character, of temperament! with all what a necessity for progress, for activity, for change; with some, what superiority over others, what powerful faculties! compared with ordinary minds what vigorous, admirable genius! But there, among the celestials, one person is as like another as one sheep is like another sheep in everything! temperament, opinion, intelligence, capacity, pugnacity, universally an instinct of *status quo*: some have the privilege of governing the others, but without any sign of natural superiority.* Upon my word, if these *are* human beings, it is we who are not!

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is inevitable. The Chinese are of a different race from ourselves: a point not to be contested, physiologically speaking; but beside that, I maintain that they are inferior, intellectually speaking.

This inferiority may be contested by reference to some of their works, which denote an extraordinary intelligence of skill; but it is not of the degree of their intelligence, only of its nature, we are speaking. A Chinaman may in a degree be more intelligent than a German of Nuremberg, but his intelligence is infirm, limited, constantly the same, and not like that of the German. A beaver, for example, makes admirable dams; a dog cannot do it; but who would give the palm of intelligence to the beaver before the dog?

And if this stationary character lasts for thousands of years, in spite of centurys of eventful changes, if over a large portion of the globe, the people of this race, present under different forms the same character, what more plausible explanation could you give for these constant effects, than a constant cause, *viz.*, that of the inferiority of the race?

However, whether the Chinese are inferior or superior, as long as they sell us their tea and their ink, who cares? And what difference can our opinion make to them?

COURSE OF REFINEMENT.—The same age which produces great philosophers and politicians, renowned generals and poets, usually abounds with skillful weavers and ship-carpenters. . .

. . . The spirit of the age affects all the arts, and the minds of men, being once roused from their lethargy, and put into a fermentation, turn themselves on all sides, and carry improvements into every art and science. Profound ignorance is totally banished, and men enjoy the privilege of rational creatures, to think as well as to act, to cultivate the pleasures of the mind as well as those of the body. The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become: nor is it possible, that when enriched with science, and possessed of a fund of conversation, they should be content to remain in solitude, or live with their fellow creatures in that distant manner which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations.—*Hume*.

* (Note by Translator)—Not peculiar to China.